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## THE NEW POLITICS OF BLOODSPORT IN ONTARIO

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Ontario Premier Mike Harris recently hosted the Premier's Symposium on Heritage Hunting in Ottawa, a traditionally American forum held in Canada for the first time from August 23-27, 2000. According to the Ministry of Natural Resources web site, the purpose of the Ottawa symposium, otherwise known as the Governors' Conference (when held in the US), was nothing short of "institutionaliz[ing] hunting in North America," and "safeguard[ing] the right to hunt." Talk about regressive objectives and narrow priorities designed for a tiny constituency.

Firstly, we must ask: How can recreational killing be considered a right? Secondly, this seems a rather perverse waste of the government's time and ever eroding resources. While they're at it, why not introduce the right to golf-- in addition to hunting, another of the premier's favourite pastimes -- to the public agenda? Or what about holding a Premier's symposium to safeguard the province's water supply, particularly in the wake of the Walkerton tragedy and the important role played by the Tory's cuts in environmental regulations and spending? Clearly, something more is at work here amidst this ludicrous prioritization of public energies.

Following the tactics of the extreme right-wing, anti-environmental 'Wise Use' Movement south of the border, the Harris Government is currently seeking to introduce 'right to hunt' legislation in Ontario. This promise was first made explicit in the Tory platform (the Blueprint) for the 1999 provincial election, which pledged to "legally recognize heritage hunting and fishing practices in Ontario" through a Heritage Hunting & Fishing Act, and came on the heels of an intense lobby by Ontario's sport hunting groups.

Ontario's powerful sport hunting lobby had modelled their efforts on 1998 legislation in Minnesota, which amended the State Constitution to guarantee the right to hunt and fish. The Minnesota legislation is, in turn, part of a broader right-wing trend in the United States in which hunting advocacy groups are trying to preempt the anti-hunting and trapping efforts of animal protection groups. Alabama was the first state to amend its constitution to guarantee hunting and fishing as a right, while Pennsylvania, Colorado, Idaho, Tennessee, Wisconsin, Kentucky, and Wyoming are all currently considering this issue.

The frightening new politics of bloodsport in Ontario are privileging a special interest group -- sport hunters -- with increased and almost exclusive power over wildlife management, as well as ever-widening access to wildlife on Crown lands and public parks. As the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy (CIELAP) recently declared, the Harris government's approach to wildlife and wilderness issues "seems exclusively concerned with the interests of sport hunters and fishers [while] the concerns of other stakeholders have been excluded."

A complete restructuring of Ontario's wildlife politics and institutions is currently taking place. While the budget of the government agency Ontario Parks is being starved of funds, sport hunting and fishing interests are being given tens of millions of dollars in public money to promote their activities. The government has also set up a Fish and

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Wildlife Advisory Board, completely dominated by hunting interests to, in effect, determine how to spend money from hunting licenses, and to decide who gets a hunting license and how the number of licenses are issued (see list below).

### **The Fish and Wildlife Advisory Board**

Phil Morlock, Witney (Canadian National Sport Fishing Foundation)  
Charles Alexander, Dryden (Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters)  
Gary Ball, Peterborough (Hunting Heritage/Hunter Futures Board)  
Walt Crawford, Elora (Trout Unlimited Canada)  
Sandy Dickson, Atikokan (Canoe Canada Outfitters)  
Brian Dykstra, Marten River (Beaverland Camp)  
Sandi Jonhson, London (Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters)  
Pat Kennedy, Haliburton (Haliburton Highlands Outdoors Assoc.)  
Jack Newton, Huntsville (Ontario Hunt Clubs Association)  
George Purvis, Gore Bay (commercial fishing operator)  
Duncan Sinclair, Aylmer (Ducks Unlimited)

Further, in April 1997, the Ministry of Natural Resources signed a 'perpetual' agreement between the province and Ducks Unlimited (a hunting advocacy group), in which Ducks Unlimited was offered 99-year agreements for Crown lands on which wetland habitat restoration projects will be located. The Tories have also given Ducks Unlimited a privileged position in the Ministry of Natural Resources' planning and policy process by allowing it to participate in resource planning initiatives for Crown and private lands with wetlands conservation projects, and roles and responsibilities in areas of communications, environmental reviews, science transfer, information management, and administration.

This raises some very serious questions. Should a special interest group, with an ulterior motive – shooting and killing ducks -- be given special authority over wetlands and their management? And what right does the Harris government have signing such long-term, multi-generational leases for Crown lands without any broad public consultation?

In February 1999, the Ministry of Natural Resources announced that it would pay the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH) \$300 000 over five years to administer hunting training and licensing programs. Then, earlier this year, the public coffers were really opened for sport hunters and fishers. In March 2000, at the opening of the Outdoor Show in Toronto, Harris announced that \$15.5 million would be given to sport hunters and fishers over a four year period, including government assistance in building viewing platforms and marketing new hunting and fishing opportunities.

These gifts of money and power to sport hunting interests must also be viewed in the context of deep cuts to environment and natural resources ministries. In its five years in power, the Harris government has systematically devastated government budgets and staffing levels for forest and wildlife protection, while simultaneously offering generous new subsidies to the forest, mining, and sport hunting industries. In essence, the Harris agenda is to systematically take out money allotted for the public good and hand it over to its preferred special interest groups that have an inherent inclination to exploitation

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### **Cutting Environmental Protection and Reshaping Park Management**

This agenda can be most plainly seen in the changing nature of park management in Ontario. In 1996, the Ministry of Natural Resources announced layoffs of 2170 people over two years. In the 1997-98 fiscal year, the operating budget for the provincial parks system was reduced by \$9.1 million per year -- about a third of its budget -- while more park services were contracted out to private operators. Ontario Parks was also instructed to increase revenue from 45% to 70% in five years (that is, from \$15 million to \$20 million). So while there has been an increased focus on revenue generation from parks, the funding for their protection continues to be reduced. In November 1999, the Ontario Parks and the forest management budgets were cut a further \$2.3 million, with the government claiming that "administrative efficiencies" could be achieved through in part by changing the operating status of up to six "underused" parks. Clearly, the objective of parks -- to balance conservation and recreational goals -- has been badly compromised to favour recreation.

### **Expanding Hunting Access**

The Harris government's transfer of power and public money to sport hunting interests has been accompanied by a greedy and obsessive drive to enhance sport hunting opportunities throughout the province. More and more Crown land is being opened to more kinds of sport hunting and to non-residents as well. In the month of April 2000 alone, the government announced: expanded hunting seasons for grouse by two weeks across most of NW Ontario; new archery seasons for expanded moose hunting opportunities in several hunting areas across northeastern Ontario; a new two-week archery season and a new open gun season for non-residents for deer hunting opportunities on Cockburn Island near Sault Ste. Marie; and new wild turkey seasons in several areas across southern and eastern Ontario. Local hunter concerns about more injured animals due to the new archery hunt and the inclusion of non-resident American hunters on Cockburn Island even fell on deaf ears. When even the concerns of local hunters are being ignored, there can be little doubt that the Harris government is pushing an extreme 'right to kill' ideology!

The other major thrust of expanding sport hunting opportunities is to open all new parks to bloodsport. The Harris government fundamentally undermined the status of parks with its Ontario 'Living' Legacy (OLL) decision (see the authors' article in the December 1999 issue of CD). The Ontario Living Legacy created only 13 new Nature Reserves out of the 378 new parks and protected areas, and no new Wilderness Parks, two designations where hunting is forbidden. In other words, the new protected areas do not defend wildlife -- sports hunting will be allowed everywhere in the 2.4 million hectares covered by the Living Legacy settlement but for a mere 48,711 hectares.

Not content to stop there, the Harris government has now set its sights on opening up previously established wilderness parks to sports hunting. Wilderness parks are the most significant ecological areas in the province, comprising vast areas of water and predominantly roadless land (a minimum of 50 000 ha in size) where natural ecosystem function is to be preserved for future generations.

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Ontario's eight Wilderness Parks are Killarney (on Georgian Bay's north shore), Quetico, Wabakimi, Woodland Caribou and Opasquia (northwestern Ontario), Lady Evelyn-Smoothwater (Temagami), and Kesagami and Polar Bear (northeastern Ontario). The first four will face the prospect of hunting when their respective current management plans come up for review. This is a frightening prospect: if the status of existing wilderness parks is altered, virtually the whole province will be open to sport hunting.

While OFAH spokesman Mark Holmes claims that "animals will win because [sport hunting] is a better management program in a lot of instances," the reality is that natural ecosystem function is inescapably compromised where areas are managed by licensing bodies seeking to ensure target populations for sport hunting. Rather than accepting the notion that nature is a commodity which must be controlled, we must learn to acknowledge, as Nancy Zylstra of the ProNature Network argues, that "nature is a constantly changing and adapting force, and allow wildlife and vegetation to balance itself by reducing human interference."

The disproportionate privilege afforded hunters is already an affront to most non-hunting Ontarians, who would prefer to enjoy the outdoors free from the blasts of shotguns, the fear of stray bullets, and the knowledge that the lives of other beings around them are imperilled for an instant of sanguinary pleasure. Bob Hunter, a co-founder of Greenpeace puts it plainly: hunting "means gunfire echoing across marshes. It means nature freezing in alarm. It means armed alpha males stumbling about through the bush: a worse hazard, if you ask me, than any black bears or moose, and a helluva lot less lovely to look at or listen to."

### **Hunting: an Old Tory Issue**

Earlier, in 1983, Alan Pope, then the Tory natural resources minister, announced the creation of 155 parks, but compromised the integrity of parks by allowing all but logging in these parks. Mining exploration, hunting and motorboats would be allowed even in wilderness parks and some nature reserves, overriding his own park planning guidelines.

At the time, the ministry recommended the creation of 245 new parks covering more than 50,000 square kilometres, mainly in Northern Ontario. OFAH, which likes to paint itself as a conservation group, bragged in its promotional brochure about its 'victory' in getting the Tory minister, with the help of the logging and mining industries, to reduce the total proposed park area by 60 percent and convincing the government "to allow hunting, trapping and small outboard motors in classes of parks which had never before allowed them."

Park policy improved markedly with the Liberal Government in the late 1980s. In a watershed decision in May 1988, the Liberal Government created 53 new parks in Ontario and introduced sweeping changes in the permitted uses of parks. The Liberals enhanced park protection by overturning a 1983 Tory policy that had allowed mining, hydroelectric development, and sport hunting in new parks in the province.

To be fair, the Liberal Governments landmark decision in 1988 produced an intense debate in Liberal cabinet on permitted uses in parks -- but at least there was a debate and the government listened! Liberal Natural Resources Minister Vincent Kerrio was in favour of continuing the Tory exploitative park policies. Gregory Sorbara, chair of the Cabinet committee on regulations, responded with serious concerns about these so-called multiple uses of parks. In the end, Kerrio gave into pressure from the public and his own



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cabinet, conceding that “We believe that the need to preserve a certain amount of pure wilderness is too important to compromise.”

Under the new Liberal policy, more than 80 per cent of the province’s park area was found in wilderness parks or nature reserves, where no logging, hunting, trapping, mineral exploration, mining or hydroelectric development is allowed. Wilderness parks were designed to leave large areas in a natural state, with the Parks Guide describing them as places where “visitors travel on foot or canoe and get in touch with a world that existed before Europeans arrived.” Status Indians were allowed to continue their traditional activities in new provincial parks falling within their treaty areas, but trapping by non-Indians was phased out.

Further, no trapping, mining or hydro-electric development was allowed in any of Ontario’s other four classes of provincial parks (historical, natural environment, waterway and recreation), though sport hunting was to be considered in these other classes of new parks pending case-by-case decisions. In short, while hunting was not entirely forbidden from protected areas, significant steps had been made by the late 1980s to enhance the ecological integrity of Ontario’s parks.

Sadly, this progress is being dramatically undone. In allowing such activities as mining exploration, sport hunting, and commercial trapping in all new parks and park additions, the Harris Tories are not only going against existing park policies, but are reshaping the foundational ethics of parks with a very distinctive ideological bent.

The fact that OFAH expressed anger at how the Liberals ‘arbitrarily’ removed sport hunting from Wilderness Parks which the Tories had originally enshrined shows how this is, in some ways, a ‘Tory issue’. Prominent Tories have long hunted on Griffith Island, north of Owen Sound, including former Tory Premier John Robarts, and now Premier Mike Harris and Minister Chris Hodgson. In the incisive words of Bud Wildman, former NDP Minister of Natural Resources, “there are only two special interest groups Premier Mike Harris listens to: the Canadian Taxpayers’ Federation and the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters.”

Fortunately, however, general public attitudes about animals and their place in the world are more advanced than those of the Harris government, and this provides potentially fertile ground for resistance to the Tory agenda. A 1980 Gallup poll commissioned by the Ministry of Natural Resources found that 73 per cent of Ontarians opposed mining in parks and 86 per cent opposed hunting. Similarly, a recent Oracle poll (October 1999) found that 77 per cent of the Ontario public opposes sport hunting in all parks and protected areas (including majorities in northern and central Ontario). Further, the percentage of Ontarians who hunt has been in consistent decline for the past two decades, shrinking to only 3.5% of the province in 1996 according to an Environment Canada survey.

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### **Which way forward?**

A key strategy must be to increase awareness of the current drive to privatize wildlife management, expand sport hunting opportunities throughout the province, and legislate the 'right to hunt'. Keeping wildlife management in public control, and not in the hands of special interests, will require unprecedented coalition building among advocates of environmental protection, animal rights, gun control, and First Nations. Given the obsessive nature of the Harris government's sport hunting agenda and its cozy relationship with OFAH, it is likely to continue to ride roughshod over public sentiment and the objectives of parks and public control of wildlife management in favour of a small but privileged minority of hunters. It is also critical for this coalition to make these policies an election issue and to defeat the Harris government. Perhaps a new government might listen to the will of the public and consider the rights of other species.

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